The Stories We Adopt: Tracing "The Red Thread" in Contemporary Adoption Narratives

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The Kinning of Foreigners

Founding a family through adoption does not only entail legal procedures, but also cultural work. During their lengthy "pregnancies," adopters refashion their individual identities and those of their children-to-be into familial identities. This process of "kinning" is continued long after the arrival of the adoptee.[1] Every family-in-the-making renegotiates the identities of its (future) members, but adoptive families are special in several respects. In the absence of biological lineage, adopters depend solely on cultural repertoires for the forging of family ties across the divides of "race," religion, class, and nationality. Now that adoption in Western societies has become increasingly transnational and "transracial," because of the dwindling number of infants available for adoption domestically, resemblance can no longer be used to help draw prospective family members from opposite parts of the globe together. In order for an adoptee to be transformed into a next-of-kin, it is first divested of the ties that link it to its birth country and subsequently reinscribed with the particularities of its family and country of destination, a true labor of imaginative "transubstantiation." This (religious) term is introduced by Signe Howell to bring out the wholesale, almost miraculous nature of the transformations imposed upon adoptees. Furthermore, adopters tend to be even more driven to seek recognition in their parental role than biological parents are, because transnational adoption has always been contested since it began to be practiced systematically in the wake of World War II and the Korean War. Finally, adopters feel

called upon to explain adoption to adoptees to alleviate the trauma of their abandonment in their country of origin.

Narrative plays a crucial role in these ongoing processes of identity renegotiation. As Walter R. Fischer's philosophical, Jerome Bruner and Dan P. McAdams' psychological, and Margaret Somers' sociological perspectives on the narrative construction of identity have revealed, individual identity is primarily experienced as a life story that is worked on from early adolescence onward. The ability to craft a coherent and compelling life story is essential to gaining social recognition in Western liberal societies (Somers). Narratives enable persons to stage and enact the personae they want to identify with. This explains why adopters tend to engage quite intensively in various forms of life writing, ranging from published autobiographies to informal ego-documents such as diaries, family photo albums, memoirs, and weblogs.

Often enough, such life writings are addressed expressly to and produced for infant adoptees, even if the child is not yet present in the family. Adopters invest considerable labor in fabricating origin stories that shall help the adoptee in her/his process of identity formation. Besides ego-documents, this drive is also manifest in the flourishing niche market of children's books about adoption for young adoptees that are mostly produced by stakeholders in transnational adoption. These picture books anticipate the painful and awkward questions that adoptees are bound to ask sooner or later. Just like any other child (and perhaps even more so), adoptees want to find out where they come from. Rather than hiding their child's adoption, which used to be the custom in domestic adoption in the early twentieth century and Korea adoption in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, contemporary adopters frankly acknowledge their child's foreign roots. With the onset of China adoption in the nineties, adoptees are taught how to (re)tell the story of their adoption as a fact of life to be proud of rather than to ignore

their birth in a foreign country as a false start that is best forgotten. Such origin stories assist them in the complex endeavor of somehow reconciling their birth in another part of the globe with their membership in a (most often) white middle-class family in the West (Dorow 25).

Origin stories also serve to legitimize global adoption in the eyes of the outside world, which views this mode of family making with increasing suspicion. As the number of children available domestically for adoption continues to decrease, transnational adoption is increasingly becoming a highly charged issue because of the evermore restrictive policies of major donor countries such as Russia and China in the twenty-first century (Selman 590). Meanwhile, the demand for adoptees is rising because of the growing number of infertility problems in Western couples that follows from delayed parenthood. The widening gap between supply and demand has undercut the previously omnipresent humanitarian motif—saving "orphans" from poor countries that legitimized international adoption well into the 1980s. Alternative apologies are hard to come by nowadays, since a chorus of critics is directing the international community's attention to the blurry boundaries between legal and illegal adoption practices. Notesong Srisopark Thompson and David Smolin call the attention to the inadequacy of the international Hague Convention regulating intercountry adoption as a safeguard against child trafficking. Contemporary transnational adoption has become increasingly vulnerable to the ever-present threats of child trade[2] because of the considerable sums of money involved in the transfer of non-white children from developing regions to white, middle-class couples in the West. Adding to the tumult, adult adoptees such as Jane Yeong Trenka are now publishing life stories of failed assimilation while organizing political lobbying groups to promote their cause. These activist adoptees accuse their Western parents of naïveté and color-blind racism, and

sometimes even launch frontal attacks on the whole institution of transnational adoption per se.

It comes as no surprise that origin stories for juvenile adoptees are hardly original, given the pressing social and psychological tasks they must fulfill. Adoption narratives are shaped by deeply ingrained narrative templates or "scripts," that is, normative sequences of specific actions that are performed by certain types of characters in a set order within given circumstances (Herman, "Scripts" 1048). Scripts are mental schemata that are internalized by the participants in any given cultural system. They are maintained by continual externalization through narrative artifacts. Scripts imply a behavioral dimension as "stories we live by" (McAdams) that moralize life choices implicitly by showing the consequences they might lead to. In literary terms, scripts are substantiated by stereotypical plot structures, motifs, and metaphors recycled from one story to another. Faced with the daunting challenge of explaining adoption to adoptees and the outside world, stakeholders support each other by sharing stories within communities of adoptive families organized around specific donor countries. These communities have been boosted by the social facilities of new digital media in which pieces of information and advice are widespread.

This article examines the dynamics of such communal narrative recycling to explicate the largely implicit morality of adoption narratives, thereby opening them up to moral deliberation. Given the controversial nature of contemporary transnational adoption, a self-reflexive, morally aware approach to the quandaries of transnational adoption is called for. While facilitating such an approach, we want to illuminate the existential functions of storytelling. Stories are not only sources of entertainment and aesthetic pleasure, they also provide repertoires for identity construction. This certainly also applies to stories for the very young, arguably even more so if we consider the

socializing function of children's literature. We will focus on China adoption because since the 1990s it has been the major donor country for Western adopters. Furthermore, we will restrict ourselves to the circulation of origin stories within three of the leading receiving countries, the United States, Spain, and Canada. The United States and Spain lead the list of the top ten receiving countries adopting from China, while Canada occupies the fifth position. Within the virtual, web-based communities of parents adopting from China, variations on one plot in particular have turned out to be astonishingly popular: the ones referring to a Red Thread. Stakeholders like to emphasize the fact that this story derives from Chinese folklore. It has been recycled so frequently that it has evolved into a canonical origin story. The Red Thread plot has given its name to numerous books, documentaries, web forums, newspaper sections, theater plays, and songs about adoption.[3] This essay compares various adaptations of the Red Thread plot to its source text to unearth the submerged moral commonplaces that make transnational adoption acceptable to adoptees and the societies that receive them.

On a methodological level, we want to demonstrate the value of using an approach from the humanities—narrative analysis—to explore the emotional and social complexity of transnational adoption. Transnational adoption has been studied primarily by means of methods and concepts from the social sciences, most notably developmental psychology (Brooks et al. 14). Psychologists mainly do outcome studies that monitor the mental well-being of adoptees, focusing on one party of the adoptive triad only, while neglecting the perspectives of birth parents. As transnational adoption is not only an economic, legal, geopolitical, and psychological affair, but also involves a myriad of cultural transactions, approaches from the humanities should also be brought to bear upon the phenomena at stake. A wealth of studies has been produced on the

cultural framing of global adoption in the United States, yet cultures of adoption in European receiving countries have received far less attention.

Matchmakers and Arranged Marriages

The Red Thread plot features in different East Asian narrative traditions, including Chinese folklore (Williams 279). In the latter context, it tells of a matchmaker, the Old Man of the Moon, who arranges marriages by tying a red string between prospective partners the moment they are born. This legend has inspired a number of folktales, the most popular among them being the story of the orphan Wei Ku, sometimes translated as Wei Gu (Birch 39). The tale relates how Wei Ku develops into an adult man with a desperate longing for a woman who could finally provide him with a family of his own. While Wei Ku is waiting for a friend who believes he has found a suitable match for him, he encounters an old man who reads a book by the light of the moon. Unable to decipher the letters, Wei Ku asks the man what sort of book he is reading. He answers that it is a book that has been written in heaven—or, in some versions, in the "underworld"—recording all the marriages on Earth. Wei Ku wants to know if he is going to marry the woman his friend is about to propose. The old man reveals that Wei Ku's time has not yet come; his wife-to-be is only three years old. Wei Ku is destined to marry her by the time she turns seventeen. The old man grants Wei Ku a vision of his future "bride," who is only a little girl in the arms of a poor peasant woman who makes a living by selling vegetables. Wei Ku is filled with disgust at the sight, for he cannot possibly marry such a poor and ugly girl and decides to have her killed. He orders a servant to commit the murder the next day, but the servant fails, only wounding the girl in the forehead. Fourteen years later, the officer who employs Wei Ku offers him his daughter as a reward for his faithful service. The girl is seventeen years old and very lovely. Strangely, she always wears a flower between her eyebrows. When asked why,

she tells Wei Ku that she was stabbed in the forehead as a child. She also reveals that she is not the officer's daughter but his niece. Her parents died when she was very young, and her nanny looked after her for several years. They managed to eke out a living by selling vegetables at the market. Later on, the officer adopted her. After Wei Ku hears the story, he tells her that the man who stabbed her in the forehead had been commissioned by him to kill her. The folktale ends with the observation that man cannot change his fate, try as he might. This exemplum is an obvious apology for the institution of arranged marriages. Since all marriages are predestined, no prospective partner needs to get upset over his or her individual lack of choice.

Families Made in Heaven: Adoption as Romance

Adopters and adoptees do not have much of a choice either. They are matched up by anonymous officials working for bureaucratic adoption agencies through lengthy procedures that are hardly transparent to the parties involved. Although citizens of liberal Western societies are unlikely to be endeared to the institution of arranged marriages, they do seem to take to the idea that their adopted children were destined to become involved with them, as it seems to mitigate the unsettling arbitrariness of adoption procedures that initiate a lifelong link between perfect strangers with little to no regard for their individual characteristics.

Western adaptations of the Red Thread plot can be traced back to the mid-1990s, when China was restructuring its adoption policy. Stricter regulations meant that Western couples expecting to adopt children from China were faced with a potential loss of opportunity. Because China was the principal sending country at that moment, the potential loss of opportunity was not taken lightly. Understandably, China's revision of its adoption regulations was a cause for great worry among organizations such as

Adoptive Parents China (APC), a virtual community of American stakeholders that was established during the same period through the emergent World Wide Web. If we can go by this virtual community's own historiography [3]—the adoptive mother Stefani Ellison was the first to connect the Red Thread plot to transnational adoption: "An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance; the thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break." The aphorism caught on quickly in the virtual communities of adoptive parents. It was quoted time and again in online forums, listservs, and weblogs. It is possible that Ellison was set on the track of the Red Thread tale by a children's book by Ed Young (*The Red Thread*, 1993), a Chinese-born, U.S.-based children's author, but there is no extant proof of this. Young's book translates and retells the Chinese tale without transferring it to the context of adoption. From the mid-1990s onward, the plot of the Red Thread became a big hit, both in web-based adoptive communities and in children's books for adoptees.

Adoption books for young adoptees sell. Aspiring adoptive parents often buy books for their prospective children well before a child is even assigned to them and years before the child is able to read. This suggests that adopters anticipate the need to deal with uncomfortable questions about origins and racial difference long in advance of receiving their adoptee child (Anagnost 390). The Red Thread plot appears to serve this need quite well, given its wide-spread dissemination in countries adopting from China. This article focuses on the adaption of the Red Thread plot in a Spanish adoption narrative of the same name, *El Hilo Rojo* (2006), by Liao Yanping, a Chinese author based in Barcelona who has worked for Spanish adoption agencies in China and authored a couple of books for Chinese adoptees. Spain is an interesting case because it rapidly transformed itself into the second most important receiving country in the world with the advent of China adoption in the 1990s. While discussing *El Hilo Rojo,* we will

also make passing references to affiliated works, such as *The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairy Tale* (2007) by Grace Lin, an Asian-American author of children's books; *Little Miss Ladybug & Her Magical Red Thread* (2002) by a Canadian adoptive mother, Karen Acres; *Norah's Red Thread* (2013) by the likewise Canadian adoptive mother Heather Campbell Wood; and *En algún lugar de China* ("Somewhere in China," 2009), by a Spanish adoptive mother, Ana Folgueira. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, China functioned as the principal donor country to the three receiving countries where these children's books were published, sending out about 10,000 children per year (Selman 581). As a consequence of China's one-child policy, these adoptees are mostly girls, with the result that the Chinese girl has become the iconic adoptee par excellence (Marre and Bestard 30). This is manifest in the tendency of children's books to feature Asian girls in the leading role.

Most adaptations of the Red Thread plot do not refer to the original tale about the Old Man of the Moon, but to Ellison's reworking of the Chinese folktale on the Internet. *Little Miss Ladybug*, for instance, quotes Ellison's words between two huge quotation marks and categorizes the quotation as "an ancient Chinese belief" (Acres 3). Grace Lin's *The Red Thread* (2007) also opens by paraphrasing Ellison: "There is an ancient Chinese belief that an invisible, unbreakable red thread connects all those who are destined to be together." *En algún lugar de China* merely mentions the motif of a red string that binds orphans to their foreign parents. The only book that explicitly acknowledges the original folktale is the Spanish *El Hilo Rojo*, whose subtitle *Cuento Popular Chino* ("Chinese folktale") is indicative of the adaptation of the Chinese original. *El Hilo Rojo* modifies the Chinese tale too drastically to count as a translation. Like the other books considered here, it changes the original marriage plot to become a story of adoptive family-making. Its principal character— translated as Wu—is not

trying to get married, but to become a father. We are told that he has already been married for ten years, but that he and his wife have been unable to conceive a child during all this time. As in the Chinese folktale, Wu meets up with an old man in the middle of the night who is pouring over a book containing illegible words. The Old Man of the Moon discloses to Wu that he is in charge of matching children to parents. Wu asks if the latest medicine his wife has tried will yield any result. The Old Man tells him that his daughter has already been born, but that she will not join them before she is four years old. When Wu asks the old man about the meaning of the bag he is carrying around, he offers the following explanation:

> Hilos rojos para atar las muñecas de los padres y los hijos. Esto no se ve en la vida mortal, pero una vez están atados ya no pueden separarse. Están unidos desde que nacen y para nada cuenta la distancia que los separe o que sus familias sean enemigas, o su posición social. Tarde o temprano se unirán. He visto que tú y tu esposa ya estáis unidos a vuestra futura hija, así que no hay nada que hacer salvo esperar .
>
> Red threads to tie to the wrists of parents and their children. They cannot be seen by mortals, but once they are tied they cannot be separated. They are tied the moment they are born and the distance between them, the enmity between their families or their social position does not count. Sooner or later they are going to be united. I have seen that you and your wife are already tied to your future daughter, so there is nothing to do except to wait. (12)

This paragraph clearly shows how an affiliation narrative is superimposed on the original marriage plot. Parents are united with children who are predestined to become theirs in the same way that lovers are destined to come together even if they are separated by an apparently insurmountable distance, as with Ulysses and Penelope, or even if their families are enemies, as with Romeo and Juliet, or even if differences in social position keep them apart, as in *Cinderella*. As in these stories, in *El Hilo Rojo* love is the strongest motor force and shapes destiny. The characters destined to love each other may be held back by external forces such as social conventions, but will in the end reunite for a happy ever after. Thus, in Yanping's adoption narrative, Wu refuses to abide by the Old Man's prediction on account of his noble descent and his high position in court: "¿Cómo voy a tener una hija de la vendedora de coles chinas?" ("How am I going to have the daughter of the woman who sells Chinese cabbage?"). Hence, Wu rejects the child because of social reasons in spite of his ardent desire to become a father. Yanping subsequently strips the Chinese folktale of its violent elements. One of Wu's servants checks up on the market saleswoman, reporting that she and the child are dressed in rags. Wu argues that "familia y mi posición social no me permite tenerla entre mis brazos" ("my family and social position prevent me from taking her in my arms"). He nevertheless commissions the servant to give the poor woman a pearl necklace so that she can buy food and clothes for the girl. In return, she is requested to abscond, which may suggest how poor parents are easily bribed into relinquishing their progeny and therefore do not really count as parents. The final turn of the story resembles the original folktale. Wu's employer offers him his daughter, not as a woman to marry but as a child to parent, as a reward for his excellent performance at work. Predictably, the precious gift girl is four years old. She is described as beautiful and "de buena cuna" ("well-born"). As a tribute to her beauty and respectable

social status, she wears the pearl necklace that Wu gave to the cabbage seller a few years earlier. Wu is puzzled and asks his employer how the girl has come into possession of the necklace. As in the original story, he learns that the girl is the niece, rather than the daughter of Wu's employer. After the loss of her parents, she was taken care of for some months by her nurse, who made a living by selling vegetables at the market. The scar in the original story has been replaced with the necklace as the tell-tale sign that reveals covert orphan-hood. Jack Zipes (124) argues that Cinderella is one of those stories to which we are irresistibly drawn from one generation to another. This is also the case for *El Hilo Rojo*, with Cinderella representing the adoptee, who has a low social status but is nevertheless destined to become a princess, finally achieving recognition after an unhappy period of abuse and neglect.

El Hilo Rojo represents a girl who has suffered abandonment thrice. First, she lost her biological parents. Next, she was separated from her nurse. And finally, she was given away by her relatives in the form of a reward to a man who wanted a child. It is a story of repeated callous abandonment. In compensation, however, we are given to believe that her new family has always been hers. The red thread of fate is there to persuade the implied reader (the adoptee) that this is the definitive family that will end the child's orphan-hood forever. The stereotypical image of the adoptive parents as overflowing with everlasting love, conventional in children's books about adoption, contrasts strongly with the ease with which the child's initial caretakers gave her up. This contrast underscores the suggestion that she is now where she was always meant to be and that her previous caretakers cannot even begin to compare to her adoptive parents. Just like Cinderella, the poor girl escapes from abusive family conditions through love, albeit parental love rather than romantic passion. Thus, a romance script is reconfigured to suit the kinning of adopters and adoptees.

From Rags to Riches

Yanping's *El Hilo Rojo* is not an isolated or unique case. All Red Thread tales discussed in this paper have tailored adoptive family making to a romance script. They all conflate and compress differences of gender, "race," ethnicity, nationality, and class governing global adoption into a matter of class alone. This is in keeping with their fairy-tale nature, as fairy tales focus on rags-to-riches scenarios about transitions from poverty to wealth more than on any other social difference. In this respect, fairy tales are in line with a larger collection of orphan stories from a variety of narrative genres (melodrama, sentimental fiction, the adventure story) highly popular in children's literature as well. Stories about orphans and foundlings all represent spectacular turnabouts in the social positions of their leading characters as in the case of *El Hilo Rojo*. The adopters' superior social class is prominent in Grace Lin's *The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairy Tale,* which tells a story about a king and a queen who rule over a magnificent kingdom, but are nevertheless unhappy because they suffer from a nagging pain in their hearts that no doctor, scientist, or wiseman can cure. One day a peddler informs them that their hearts ache because they are being pulled by a red thread. He lends the royal couple magic spectacles that enable them to see the strings. They try to cut them, but when this proves impossible, they decide to leave their kingdom behind to follow the thread. After a long and difficult journey, they reach the shores of a faraway land. Their clothes are in tatters, but nobody seems to take notice of it because all the people living there are poorly dressed. The red thread leads them into a humble dwelling where a dark-haired baby girl holds the two red strings that are linked to their hearts. They ask around to find out to whom the baby belongs, but they cannot make themselves understood. Finally, an elderly woman reveals that the baby belongs to them. The royal couple takes

the baby home, where she becomes the princess of the kingdom, which is now filled with true joy and happiness.

The royal couple's journey to the child involves considerable social hazards. They have to leave their magnificent castle behind and they end up with their clothes in tatters. The journey humbles them and places them on a par with the poor inhabitants of the foreign land where their child was born. Fortunately, the dimming of their royal splendor is but a temporary degradation. As soon as they return to their kingdom, they experience no difficulty in resuming their former status, which is made manifest in their appearance, as they are dressed in proper attire again. Moreover, it is suggested that the girl has belonged to the royal couple since her birth. Through these processes of mutual social attunement, the differences in social status between the royal couple and the orphan girl are canceled out. Like Cinderella, she metamorphoses into a princess as soon as she is discovered by those who are capable of appreciating her true value.

In parent-child romance, the gender of each partner does not appear to be of paramount importance. This helps to obscure the gender bias in China adoption. All four books being examined here carefully eschew the sensitive topic of China's one-child policy and the traditional Asian preference for boys, which induced the large-scale migration of Chinese girls to Western countries. The gender that causes their rejection in the East is the cause of their popularity in the West, since parents adopting in China are well aware that by selecting this donor country, they are also choosing the gender of their child-to-be. Nevertheless, gender is not explicitly thematized or problematized anywhere in the stories. Its presence is largely surreptitious. In *En algún lugar de China*, for example, the bird performing the role of matchmaker asks the parents a question that must be answered correctly if they are to receive a child: "Si te ofreciera un deseo, ¿tu corazón pediría?" ("If I offer you to fulfill a wish, what would your heart

ask for?") The mother answers promptly: "Tener una niña en mi casa" ("To have a girl in my house"). The reader cannot help wondering if the wish to have a boy in one's house could also have been a correct answer to the matchmaker's question.

Racial difference is likewise smoothed over in these picture books for young adoptees. Yanping's story downplays ineradicable physical differences by orientalizing both the adopter and the adoptee, tacitly suggesting that adoption is an ancient Asian custom that has always formed part and parcel of Chinese culture. Racial difference disappears behind the veil of class and is displaced onto apparently trivial details, such as the *Chinese* cabbages sold by the orphan's nurse. Another effective means of downplaying difference is keeping the birth parents out of the picture, a strategy employed by all four works under study. Yanping's story does not even touch upon the question of who conceived the baby in the first place or why she was abandoned. The same observation applies to Grace Lin's book. Although the girl holding the other ends of the red thread is firmly embedded within a village community, nobody seems to have an exclusive claim or commitment to the child. Like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it seems as if these children have just grown and are there for the taking. It is a widespread assumption within the cultural imaginaries of receiving countries that adoptees are synonymous to orphans, even though this is not necessarily the case. Some parents are forced to relinquish their children through dire poverty, others abandon their children because they have transgressed the one-child quota, and still others are pressured into giving up their children because they are unwed mothers. There are also parents in developing areas who assign their children to an "orphanage" for a limited amount of time because they are temporarily unable to take care of them. And indeed, there is a persistent stream of rumors coming out of China that some children are kidnapped by child traders to satisfy the ever growing demand for adoptable children.[4]

Be this as it may, the picture books at stake tacitly cater to the commonplace assumption that adoptees are essentially orphans by rendering the birth parents invisible. Chinese birth parents get replaced in these stories by depersonalized signs of Chinoiserie, rendering the birth country rather than the birth mother the object of affective identification, thereby enabling adoptees from China to be proud of their ethnic background without associating it with an individual or family there.

In a further attempt to marginalize ethnic difference, the physical differences between adopters and adoptees are persistently downplayed in these books. In Grace Lin's work, the physical dissimilarities between Western adopters and Asian adoptees are largely reduced to a difference in hair color only, a difference that is common in any family, biological or adopted. This story's toned-down physical differences are overpowered by the attribution of biological kinship through the color of the thread of fate. One may wonder why an invisible thread needs to have any color at all. Nonetheless, all adaptations insist that the thread of fate is red. Obviously, this is not just any color, but the color of blood. And indeed, red is the color of anyone's blood, regardless of skin color. The attribution of color transforms the thread of fate into a sort of umbilical cord; a cord that is not attached to the mother's uterus, but to the parents' hearts, in keeping with the frequently uttered suggestions that adoptive children have not grown in the bellies, but in the hearts of their adoptive mothers during the long waiting period they have had to endure. Even if we assume that the prominent class difference in these tales should be interpreted as a stand-in for a covert "racial" difference, one would still have to conclude that both ghosts are simultaneously exorcized by the magic transformation of the adoptee into a chosen girl, a princess, or a Cinderella, who had to suffer ignominy before finally receiving proper recognition.

Narrative Kinning: Adopters

Let us now analyze more systematically how fictional origin stories for infant adoptees affect the kinning of foreigners in transnational adoption. How do these stories serve to renegotiate the identities of adopters and adoptees? Beginning with the adopters, the first strategy that stands out is the persistent tendency to subject adoptive family making to fate. This insistence is pervasive in adopters' discourses, not just in the books they read to their children, but also in their informal exchanges with each other. Signe Howell recorded the following dialogue between two Norwegian mothers who adopted girls from China simultaneously:

> One mother said laughingly to the other, "Just image [*sic*] if Ida had been given to you and Maria to me. I wonder how that would have worked out." "Oh, dear me, no," said the other, shocked, "that would not have worked out at all. Ida would not have suited you. She is so like us, but not in the least like you. No, that would have been quite impossible. Ida was really meant for us. She fits in so well. And it is clear to everyone that Maria could not be anybody's child but yours." (Howell and Marre 301)

Adopters cannot tolerate the idea that they could have been matched up with just any child. Tributes to the power of fate serve to keep this disconcerting suggestion at bay. There are political advantages to the idea of predestination as well. The Red Thread plot silences complex moral issues of entitlement and glosses over the social inequality that underlies the transfer of children from destitute parents in developing countries to wealthy but childless couples in the West. Global adoption is premised on the unequal exchange of substances for ideas. Highly priced substances (in this case children) are

imported into the West, while the West attempts to export its family values to the donor countries, imposing a kinship system that revolves around the idea of lifelong, exclusive ownership on cultures that take extensive systems of fostering and shared parenting for granted (Howell). However, if these unequal exchanges have been predetermined by fate in each and every case, then who is to blame?

Given the need to attribute adoptive family making to the dictates of fate, it is understandable that adoption literature for young adoptees adheres to the narrative conventions of the fairy tale. Fairy tales transform contingency into destiny. Their opening formula reminds the reader of the fact that the sequence of events to be narrated has already reached its preordained destination, while their inexorable ending drives the message home that once things are what they were meant to be, they will stay that way forever. Moreover, fairy tales have the additional asset of a wide geographical distribution. As folklorists have amply demonstrated, fairy tales do not merely cross the borders between countries, but also between continents, passing from North to South and East to West and vice versa (Aarne and Thompson; Dekker et al.). As such, fairy tales seem to be particularly apt vehicles for representing the intertwined lives of individuals from different parts of the globe. The insistence on fate also explains why adopters rarely refuse a child that is assigned to them by adoption agencies in real life: "Norwegian parents are given a day to decide if they will accept the child they are offered. Virtually none refuse. They feel that the child being offered is somehow meant for them, that to refuse it would be to deny the element of destiny . . ." (Howell and Marre 304). Clearly, then, narrative strategies and real-life practices are closely intertwined through the cultural work of kinning.

It matters vitally to many parents adopting from China that the Red Thread tale derives from Chinese folklore, as there seems to be a felt need to legitimize adoption from the perspective of the child's birth culture. Adaptations of the Red Thread tale suggest that adoption perfectly harmonizes with Chinese traditions and customs. This explains why the king and queen in Grace Lin's adoption fairy tale meet with no resistance whatsoever when they come to take the little girl away. On the contrary, they are expressly invited to do so by an elderly sage who seems to personify the accumulated wisdom of her community. The suggestion that adoption is in keeping with ancient Chinese customs and traditions obscures the unequal exchange between substances and ideas mentioned above. Contrary to couples adopting from South Korea in the 1950s and 60s, contemporary adopters have grown keenly aware of the pitfalls of "whitewashing" the adoptee completely. Stakeholders in China adoption often embrace a celebratory form of multiculturalism and appear to be quite open to ideas and values from their child's birth country. Due to substantial political and linguistic barriers, however, their knowledge of Chinese culture rarely goes beyond the level of mere "birth culture fictions" (Cheng 79-80). Apart from the fact that adopters tend to be rather selective in their understandings of Chinese culture, there is another, more serious, downside to adoptive "ethnochic," in that the birth culture seems to replace the birth parents as the anchor point of the adoptee's visibly different outward appearance. We have pointed out how birth parents are moved out of the picture by the Red Thread tales discussed above. This may satisfy the emotional need of adoptive parents to become the primary and exclusive love objects of their children, but it fails to pay heed to the needs and deprivations of the birth parents involved. It does not necessarily serve the interests of the adoptees either, who often become obsessed with the quest of finding their birth parents once they have grown up.

Sociological theories help to account how parental love is recoded as romantic love in adoption narratives. As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim argue in *The Normal Chaos of Love*, sexual liberation and women's emancipation exerted a huge impact on family life in the latter half of the twentieth century, causing, among other things, a higher divorce rate. With the marital bond becoming increasingly unstable, the child is transformed into the "unique, primary love object" (37), in compensation for the eroding chances of finding lasting love within partner relationships. This shift affects all modern Western families, but it may be more conspicuous for adoptive couples, who have to wait an inordinately long time before they can finally establish a family relationship with a child. The discovery of infertility that most often precedes the decision to adopt is already a lengthy process lasting several years, which is then followed by an "adoptive pregnancy" of another couple of years. During this period, the urge to idealize and romanticize the child-to-come in adopter parents may be difficult to suppress.

Narrative Kinning: Adoptees

How do these stories assist the "transubstantiation" of the adoptee? Red Thread tales all magically transform adoptees from outcasts into a privileged elite. Waifs magically transform into royalty, and unwanted children who go from hand to hand are metamorphosed into chosen love objects for parents with superior nurturing qualities. All these stories turn the Chinese "orphan" into a "priceless child" (Zelizer) who becomes an irreplaceable and invaluable member of her new family. Red Thread tales assure the adoptee that she was not just up for grabs, but predestined to become a member of the family that is raising her now. Thus, Red Thread tales help to

acknowledge the foreign origin of the adoptee without infringing on her sense of belonging to a Western family. Only by being raised in a Western country can a pauper metamorphose into a princess. These stories do not give adoptees much cause for nostalgia for their lost parents.

As these picture books cater to three- to five-year-olds, it is difficult to find out how adoptees respond to them. But it is quite obvious that the people who wrote and bought these books attribute a strong healing power to the Red Thread plot. When commenting on a review of Acres' *Little Miss Ladybug* on Amazon.com, an adoptive parent explains that the tale "is another way that she [their adoptive daughter] feels connected to us, and it helps ease her sadness when she is trying to understand who her birth parents were and why they may have given her up."[5] The use of framing tales indicates clearly that these books are meant to have a transformative effect on adoptees. Grace Lin's *The Red Thread,* for instance, begins with a realistic picture of a quotidian three-person family in an ordinary living room. The girl who sports a crown on her head, hands her parents a book with the same cover picture as the one we are reading: "This story again? You've heard it a hundred times. Are you sure? Okay, I'll read it" (Lin 3). The book ends with an image of the same family on the same couch, with the girl sitting in her mother's lap. Significantly, the three of them now all wear crowns. *Little Miss Ladybug* and *En algún lugar de China* achieve a similar effect by explicitly addressing a "you"—the adoptee—and by embedding the book within the practice of reading bedside stories. Karen Acres ends with a "Goodnight my wonderful child. Goodnight to you Little Miss Ladybug. We love you," while Folgueira's story finishes with the image of a mother at the bedside of her child, turning the pages of a book that looks just like the one we have just been reading. Folgueira explains that writing the book grew out of her daily habit of telling bedside stories to her adopted daughters from

China. Moreover, she had the book illustrated by an uncle of the girls, Emilio Amade. Amade's work is based on a mural painting he painted as a welcome gift on the occasion of the eldest girl's arrival. At a certain point, Folgueira came to realize that the images in the mural representing a girl in a plane triggered questions that were best answered in a book. Such links between the world inside and the world outside of the story indicate that the stories are meant to "spill over" into the everyday lives of the reading audience.

In fact, the reformist zeal of the two Spanish books examined goes even further. Both have an outspokenly pragmatic orientation, in that they link themselves directly to the actual institutions that police China adoption in Spain. Yanping's version of the Red Thread plot does not rest content with a mere happy ending. After the girl has been "adopted," Wu's wife embarks on a quest to find the Old Man of the Moon in order to thank him. When they finally meet, she asks him if he can use the red strings to ensure the fates of other children who do not as yet have families presided over by women like herself, suffering from the disgrace of infertility (the disgrace of parents who cannot keep their children is left undiscussed). The Old Man promises that her desire will be fulfilled. And "muchos años después" ("many years later"; Yanping 31), suggesting that this ancient tale finally managed to make an impact on the contemporary world, a CCAA house was founded in the country's capital. In the real world, the acronym corresponds to the Center of Chinese Adoption Affairs, which handled international adoptions from Beijing during the 1990s. In Yanping's account it stands for "Casa China de Adopción y Acogimiento" (31), which may be translated as "Chinese House for Adoption and Shelter." A final paragraph transfers the supposedly age-old unifying power of the Old Man of the Moon to Chinese adoption agents: "Se dice que el Viejo Anciano de la Luna les dio los hilos rojos para que aten a las personas que quieran hijos

a los niños que no tengan familia" ("It is said that the Old Man of the Moon gave them the red threads so they can tie the children without families to the ones who desire children") (32). The conclusion traces the ramifications of the Red Thread plot from Chinese folklore to contemporary adoption practices in Spain. A similar observation can be made about Ana Folgueira's picture book, which she published in direct association with the AFAC, the largest Spanish association of families adopting from China, and El Corte Inglés, a leading Spanish department store that funded the edition as part of their social responsibility program. Folguiera and the illustrator Amade designed the book as a social project: 50 percent of its cover price goes directly to Chinese orphanages to pay for surgery on abandoned Chinese children. The book sales enabled them to cover the costs of nine operations in the first year of its publication; Folgueira claims that the surgery is necessary for making abandoned children eligible for adoption.[6] Thus, while all four books function as apologies for global adoption, the Spanish books move beyond mere apology toward active support of adoption institutions. Returning to Signe Howell's metaphor of the "transsubstantion" that is involved in the kinning of adoptees, one could say that this is truly an instance of "the word made flesh." First, stories are produced that are to meet the supposed psychological and emotional needs of adoptees in compensation for the lack of biological affinities in the adoptive family. Next, the financial resources generated through these stories are remitted to create larger amounts of adoptable children by modifying their physical appearance so as to make them conform to Western standards of beauty and health. These children are subsequently presented with the very books that facilitated their entry into Western countries in the first place. Thus, these books create their own audience so to speak. We seem to have come full circle here.

All's Well That Ends Well?

According to a well-known folktale, babies were delivered to their parental homes by storks that flew from Paris to the rest of the world. This tale helped parents to circumvent the intimacies and complexities of human reproduction while dealing with the unavoidable question of where children come from. Today, sex is no longer much of a taboo in much of the Western world, but there are lots of other phenomena that are too awkward or sensitive to be confronted directly, such as the potentially traumatic fact that not all children living in Western countries come from the "belly" of the woman they call "mother." Some children were born from an unknown body that lives in a far-away land. Rather than hanging from the beak of a stork, they arrived in an airplane. These adoptees are the youngest participants in the large-scale migration processes that are typical of contemporary Western societies. They also want to know where they come from. Accordingly, other tales have been constructed to broach this controversy-ridden issue tangentially. Circumvention is indeed a shared feature of this particular set of origin stories, which attribute highly specific meanings and values to ethnicity, race, class, gender, and kinship, not just in what they show and tell, but also, and more importantly, in what they leave unspoken or remove from the picture.

The moral arguments of these stories are not developed through explicit propositional statements, but through a string of events that culminates in a specific ending. The (un)desirability of the ending confers moral significance upon the courses of action that led up to it: all's well that ends well, or vice versa, all's bad that ends badly. Teasing out the implicit morality of these stories enables us to scrutinize tacit moral assumptions and commonplaces. If we acknowledge the fact that adoption takes place within the "adoptive triad" of three different interested parties, and if we subscribe to the idea that justice is served by balancing the interests and needs of all parties

involved, then one cannot but conclude that the party of the birth parents is ignored by these fairy tales. Through a narrative analysis of Red Thread tales, a number of unsettling issues resurface. The emphasis on the rule of fate tacitly assumes that women in the economically disadvantaged and politically unstable regions of the world are predestined to give birth to children who are actually meant for other couples. If children's books are meant to be socializing instruments that prepare children for balanced adulthood and (global) citizenship, then the surreptitious message that the needs of people from the poorer parts of the world do not measure up to the needs of wealthy people can hardly be conducive to the development of civic virtue. The pervasiveness of a romance plot raises the question of whether adoptive parents do not run the risk of overinvesting in the parent-child relationship in a way that places a very heavy burden upon the shoulders of the adoptee. Indeed, this is a question that any contemporary parent should ponder. It is not easy for a child to be all to its parents as compensation for the fickleness of sexual love. Evidently, the stereotypical image of adoptees as elected or chosen people is meant as an antidote to the feelings of worthlessness that might ensue from abandonment. But here we might ask whether this image does not also convey the covert message that adoptees have to be extraordinary and special in order to make up for the trials and tribulations their parents went through on their behalf, and that being just plain and ordinary will not be good enough. Given that these books explicitly dedicate themselves to furthering the transnational and transracial adoptive cause, it is entirely legitimate to address these ethical issues. Their urgency demonstrates that we should not leave academic inquiry into transnational adoption to the outcome studies of developmental psychologists only.

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Notes

[1] The term "kinning" was introduced by Signe Howell (2003, 2006). It serves to highlight the fact that the creation of family ties in global adoption is an active, ongoing process

[2] As registered on http://smellykellie.blogspot.com/2008/01/red-thread.html and http://chinaadopttalk.com/forum/index.php?action=printpage;topic=9287.0.

[3] Among them, the books for adults, Ann Hood's *The Red Thread: A Novel* and *El Hilo Rojo*, a section of the Washington Post website, the album (and homonym song) "The Red Thread" by Lucy Kaplansky. It also gives a name to miscellaneous businesses targeting adoptive families, namely adoption agencies, a shop of customized maps of China for adoptive families, and one in which prospective-adoptive parents can purchase goods to be sent to the orphanages where their children-to-be are kept.

[4] See, for instance, the documentary *China's Stolen Children* (2007) by Jezza Neumann. See also the work of David Smolin on child "laundering" ("Child Laundering").

[5] The presentation of the book as inspired by an ancient Chinese belief triggered an interesting debate among adopters who reviewed the book on the Amazon website, see http://www.amazon.com/review/R144GG7T1ULEA. The Chinese origin of the Red Thread tale, the folk tale of the lucky ladybugs is discussed there, and the idea that the story serves to comfort adoptees are all discussed here.

[6] An interview with the author, originally broadcaste by the news program of channel Tele 5, is available as a Youtube video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQbUG4W2pWU

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